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Leading for and managing diversity

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Six years ago, I was appointed Dean of the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. The School is large, with around 185 full-time academic staff, high numbers of part-time staff and over 2,000 students, both local and international. I became the first woman of colour to take that role in the history of schools of higher education in Scotland. I am known in Scotland and internationally for my work on equality, particularly on race equality. I had worked my way up the ranks in the school from someone coming in on a series of temporary contracts over 25 years to ending up in the top job.

This article offers reflections on those 6+ years in the role and how I have tried to take forward equality and anti-discrimination issues in the School. My reflections will be shaped by the fact that most of my teaching and research has largely been focused on the areas of improving racial equality and challenging racism.

The School of Education, of which I am Dean, is overwhelmingly white, and although diversity and inclusion issues are discussed and supported in an intellectual sense, ‘race’ issues remain peripheral. There is no critical mass of colleagues pushing for greater race equality or anti-racist education. The notion of delivering for a culturally relevant curriculum with culturally responsive teaching is a ‘work in progress’. Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students’ cultural references in all aspects of teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994). For example, if you are a music teacher and your class is largely interested in rock or rap, to stimulate engagement from the outset you could start from there to then broaden to other genres.

Being confident about your positional authority

As soon as the announcement was made that I had taken up the role, I had a series of requests from the press to speak about my vision for the School and the direction of travel for initial teacher education (ITE). I learnt a valuable lesson from Elizabeth Buie, a highly experienced and respected education journalist, who worked then for the *Times Educational Supplement* in Scotland. Towards the end of the interview, I asked Elizabeth if I had talked too much about ‘race’ and issues of racism. I asked her to tone the ‘race’ parts down as I did not wish readers to think that all that mattered to me was ‘race’ or that I had a ‘chip on my shoulder’. Elizabeth was surprised, and responded robustly that, given that this was the research, professional and practice field I was known for, it would seem strange if I did not

speak about these issues. Her response brings me to the first lesson in leading for diversity, which is that if you have positional authority – use it! You will never please everyone all the time, so holding on to your values, vision and principles is important. I was worried that I would be less accepted if I did not become more silent on ‘race’ issues. Elizabeth Buie’s comment reminded me that if you have the position to affect change for the better, use it, as you may not always have that place or space.

However, relying on positional authority alone is insufficient, as over-use of it can lead to disgruntled staff, and in any case, on matters of values, it has also to be about buy-in, not forced agendas and outcomes. Having been a member of staff already known in the faculty, I also had a good degree of relational authority. Thirdly, as I also taught, researched and advised on equality issues, I was able to draw on expertise authority. If you are leading for – and managing – diversity, you may not have all three but you will need to have some.

The second reflection is the need to be strategic and not rush. Selecting the areas in which to target change means you are not giving out the message that everything is wrong and everything is urgent. One of the areas I was determined had to shift was the demographics of students in ITE. Cohort after cohort of students applying to and getting into teacher education programmes was largely white, female, middle-class and monolingual. Although many of these individuals are highly committed and would make excellent future teachers, they did not represent the increasingly diverse demographics of the classrooms in twenty-first-century Scottish schools. Research has shown that when black and minority ethnic (BAME) pupils have BAME teachers, this can marginally improve test scores, and this is most pronounced in primary schools and with pupils labelled as ‘low-performing’ (Egalite et al., 2015). Having a diverse teaching force can also impact on BAME pupils’ esteem and aspirations (Gershenson et al., 2017). The lack of diversity in the teaching workforce has been a persistent and long-term issue, not just in Scotland but also many other countries across the Western world.

Getting the team right to lead the change

The School ITE portfolio was changing, and there was an opportunity with a new Master’s level ITE programme to

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begin that change. For our newest ITE programme, I took the lead to ensure the person selected was prepared to place equity and social justice issues front and centre: from how the programme was being developed and shaped, to the content of what was being taught and how assessments were carried out. The programme had to be different so as to attract a wider range of applicants, as clearly the traditional models did not produce the diversity required. The programme had to be contemporary and relevant for the twenty-first century. In this instance, it meant treating students as co-constructors of the curriculum. This was achieved by actively looking for students who were prepared to be agentic within the recruitment and selection process, who would question rather than simply believe, who were prepared to think not just out of the box but to remove boxes, and were prepared to select people who are 'not like us'. Taking proactive leadership of change and having the tenacity to walk the walk is important. Too often, leaders initiate a process and then adopt a hands-off approach. The role I had was a little like a site manager for a building project. Being seen to be onsite and visible meant that the job stayed on target, to deadline and to spec. I continue to have a role in the programme and to engage proactively with the students.

This new programme has now recruited for 2 years, and the demographics of the students bears evidence that if you want to attract diverse applicants, then you need to invest in change and to ensure that your message is explicit and clearly understood. In a cohort of 60 students over the 2 years, there are 15 languages, 14 different nationalities and ethnicities, men moving into primary and generalist education, women going into science, and students with disabilities and from a range of many minoritized BAME communities. I would suggest that this programme has the most diverse cohort of ITE students in Scotland ever, and we have had inquiries from across the world to find out how we have achieved this change.

As mentioned above, being visible and active in the process of change is important. It sends a signal to all in the organization that you are serious about the issue. A hands-off approach to the issues will result in a lackadaisical response in the workplace. Although an overly enthusiastic approach may not be appropriate or sustainable, it is important to find the balance by perhaps being more pro-active at the start – until the systems are in place – and then taking a step back. In my role as Dean, I have kept the issue of equality and diversity on the institutional agenda. I established an Equality and Diversity Committee and asked for any public-facing opportunity open to us in the School (e.g. the promotion of a programme, programme brochures, and staffing of open days) to begin to reflect the diversity of Scotland's population. This was low-cost change with potentially quick wins.

Releasing resources as required

Leading for and managing diversity will require investing in change. Shields (2004: 118) suggests that 'commitment and good intentions are not enough'. A cleverly crafted inclusive policy or equal opportunities statement is meaningless if not

enabled. This means releasing budgets to assist the change. At the start of my journey, I was cautious about doing this. However, over the years, I have harnessed those aspects of positional, relative and expert authority, and made budget decisions to deliver for equity and change. A key barrier to change is staff confidence. Emotions play a big role in creating stasis or driving change. Some equality issues are less threatening than others. I have found on issues of race, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity that there can be a paralysis of action borne out of lack of confidence, not wishing to get it wrong, and a fear of appearing bigoted. For many, it is not quite knowing how to make things happen in practice. How do I deliver a more culturally relevant curriculum, and what does culturally responsive pedagogy look like? Providing open and safe spaces for learning and professional development for all staff at all grades is key. Leading for and managing diversity does cost. It means prioritizing what you invest in. Perhaps the one subsidized office Christmas party does not take place, but instead there are a range of staff development events with inspiring speakers, practitioners and community groups that move colleagues into more global mindsets.

I have learnt that leading for change requires staying power and being prepared to absorb anger while also being willing to stand up again and again to explain why a course of action has been taken. At times, this has required me disagreeing with my own senior management team on whom I am dependent on a day-to-day basis. However, if the reason for the change is robust and can be justified, I have found that relational authority provides the leeway necessary to take the change forward.

Know yourself

At the heart of leading for and managing diversity has to be critical scrutiny of ourselves. If leadership is a contested and complex concept, so are words like diversity, inclusion and fairness. How we each perceive difference and diversity will impact on our values and approach to the issues, so understanding our own position in life and checking where we stand in the ladder of privilege is important. This means standing back and analysing our own condition, biases and beliefs. We have all been conditioned to think stereotypically about certain groups, and unlearning and unpacking such embedded thinking can be threatening but necessary. As leaders and managers, there is a need to be constantly reflective of what we bring to the classroom or boardroom, to be conscious of the impact of our decisions, of the resources we choose, of those who we talent-spot and who we do not, what we consider to be right or wrong answers, and what we consider to be valid knowledge. As a leader and manager of colour, I realized that if I spoke about issues of 'race', it was difficult for some of my white colleagues to challenge me in fear of appearing prejudiced. I was equally aware that BAME colleagues, students and community members expected me to use my position to advance race equality. The pressure that places on me as the leader/manager to reassure the former while keeping the momentum up for change for the latter requires high

soft skills of diplomacy, empathetic listening, the wisdom of Solomon and being highly solutions-focused.

Finally, I have learnt to speak up even as a lone voice. I am often in senior-level meetings and committees where there are well-meaning discussions about well-intended initiatives on equality and diversity. At first, I went with the flow, not wishing to appear difficult or uncooperative. What I learnt over time is that if you allow well-meaning but uncritical initiatives and views to go forward, do not be surprised if the impact is minimal. Sara Ahmed (2012) talks about being careful not to become overly simplistic and to become trapped in 'doing the document' rather than 'doing the doing'. She also warns that creating evidence of doing something is not the same as actually doing something. Therefore, being able to showcase a policy on inclusion and equality is not the same as ensuring inclusion is really being practised on the ground. In the world of teacher education, the professional standards document that guides the teaching profession adheres to values of equality and equal opportunities, but does it in the actual lived day-to-day of the lives of *all* staff and students?

Do we see diversity and difference as liabilities or as assets? How aware are we of different equality areas? It cannot be assumed that someone who had an understanding of one equality area can transfer that understanding to other equality areas. For example, I have been bewildered, as a leader of colour, by white women colleagues who have a deep understanding of how sexism operates at an institutional, cultural and personal level but remain dispassionate that gender equality must also consider issues of intersectionality. In the same way, I have colleagues who are vocal about challenging class inequalities but unwilling to accept that, even if we had distributive justice, some groups would still be seen as more worthy than others. Some of these colleagues are less passionate about recognitional and representational justice (Fraser, 2000). Recognitional justice would require different people and groups to be explicitly recognized, as opposed to being invisible or misrecognized (e.g. Sikhs being misrecognized as being Muslims). Representational justice would seek to have diversity at the decision-making table. Therefore, as leaders for change and managers of diversity, it is important to grapple with the complexities of a hierarchy of equality and to assist the reconfiguration or reimagining of these complexities so that we enable ways to challenge what many have indicated are 'inequitable cultures' within education sites (Ahmed, 2012). As leaders for and managers of diversity, we can provide a consistent and constant message to staff and students of the need to view diversity with a 'lens of plenty'.

Leading for change requires tremendous staying power. Some days, it feels like running up a downward escalator. Change has to be strategic but also realistic. I often use the Bell curve distribution image as an analogy. There are those on the left of the curve who will disagree and, in time, they will move on and away from the organization. Persistent resistance, negativity and lack of productivity can be addressed as either a capability or behaviour issue. Change requires those who lead and manage for diversity to

have the courage to address capability or behaviour issues. Those to the right of the curve are those who will take things forward and can lead and enthuse. The task at hand is the group in the middle, and it is particularly important for this group to be brought along the journey in a way that provides them with knowledge and understanding that will enable them to bring out the best in them as educators and educational practitioners.

Importance of recognizing the impact of micro-aggressions in the workplace

Finally, in my journey in the senior management world, I have not come across many senior people prepared to discuss tough topics like institutional discrimination and how it manifests itself in the day to day. There is virtually no engagement with the concept of micro-aggressions. Derald Wing Sue (2010), currently a psychologist from Teacher's College in Columbia, suggests three forms of micro-aggressions. First, he names micro-assaults, which are largely recognizable and easiest to address. Examples include name-calling and deliberate acts of discrimination. I would expect that explicit forms of aggressions are ones that colleagues, leaders and managers would be more prepared to deal with upfront. Sue then talks about micro-insults, which are harder to identify. Often they are subtle, spur-of-the-moment and may not be perceived as insulting by the person making the comment, but they are often received that way by the person for whom the comment is intended – for example, when a comment was made to me when I held a public appointment position, noting that the organization that appointed me was fortunate as they met their equality targets in terms of race and gender by appointing me. The frustrating aspect is that as the recipient of the comments, you cannot be certain if the person making the comment understood the impact of their comment. Micro-insults are often minor but can be corrosive in time. This is a more complex situation for a manager leading for diversity, particularly if the manager is unable to decode what is happening.

The final form is what he names as micro-invalidations. Sue regards this as the most insidious form of micro-aggressions as they are not covert but can be completely hidden. However, micro-invalidations exclude, negate or nullify individuals or groups that are in less powerful positions. For example, in the education world we should consider how different groups of people are invalidated on a daily basis, for example, through invisibility in the formal and hidden curriculum.

There are a number of leadership models that many are familiar with, such as transformational, distributed, and participative, and there are also numerous management styles, from consultative and democratic to persuasive. All of these will assist in taking forward equality and diversity issues. However, the one area in my view that still requires attention is a critical self-analysis of our own positionality as a leader or manager. We have to interrogate our own biases, beliefs and values frameworks. In an increasingly diverse world and workplace, we can no longer afford

leaders or managers with simplistic views of social identities or who engage in over-generalization (Kezar and Lester, 2010). As leaders and managers, we will have varying access to power, and if we are to tackle forms of inequity and create better working and learning spaces, this is an area I would suggest we need to focus on more.

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